HOME

A Story of Today and of All Days

By GEORGE AGNEW CHAMBERLAIN

What is prettier than the awakening love in a fine young woman and her artless coquetry in leading the object of her affection up to a proposal of marriage? And what is more unpleasant to witness than her rebuff by a man who fails to understand?

CHAPTER XXVIII—Continued.

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The subjectivity of a sick man disarms woman; she knows she is safe and abandons her weapons of attack and defense as long as the invalid is taken up with the state of his insides. Clem was unaffected, even tender, with Alan as long as he was weak, but as his strength returned to him she withdrew, one by one and gently, the intimate attentions a woman accords to babes and the related helpless. But there was nothing absolute in her withdrawal; it was more a temptation than a denial, born of woman's innate desire to be pursued. While Alan was merely convalescent it contained a suppressed gayety, half demure, half mischievous, but when his full strength came back and he failed to pursue, the gayety arrested itself, turned into a questioning wistfulness and ended in the secret shame and blushes of the repulsed and undesired.

Clem saw Alan build a barrier against her, a barrier of little things, each insignificant in itself but each lending and borrowing the strength of accumulation. Alan spent hours with the old captain, walked, rode and talked with J. Y. and the judge. Between them, J. Y. and the judge had fixed up Lieber's affair and Alan had cabled.

In the midst of women Alan seemed to be able to forget woman—to forget her intentionally. There was nothing pointed in his avoidance. He kept his distance from Alix and Nance and Jane Elton in the same measure as from Clem. There was thus none of the single avoidance of the shy swain who lavishes attentions on all but her whom he would most dearly sue. Clem, least vain of beautiful women, sat long hours before her glass. Never before had the charms it revealed been questioned, never had she been forced to close in the ranks and call up the reserves, and now she felt at a loss, unaccustomed to the ready moves of the coquette. Clem dropped her face in her hands and cried.

Chapter XXIX

Clem's was not the only troubled heart on the Hill. At The Firs Mrs. Lansing moved restlessly from room to room and stopped often to read and re-read a crumpled note—Gerry's note to Alix.

Alix was still in town. Mrs. Lansing had written to her and then wired. Alix replied telling her not to come, that she wished to be alone. For hours at a time Mrs. Lansing replaced the nurse at Gerry, junior's, side. He helped her. She felt that he could help Alix.

She was almost glad when he developed some trifling ailment becoming to his years. She wired again and this time Alix came, frightened. Alix was like a wilted flower, but she braced herself until Gerry, junior, recovered into his healthy self. Then she drooped once more and refused to be comforted.

If it had not been for Alan, Alix' trouble would have cast a gloom over the rest of Red Hill, but it was known that Alan had sought out Mrs. Lansing and told her that not even he knew just how Gerry's battle stood, but that he did know that there was a battle and that Gerry would surely come back as soon as he had fought his way clear.

So the Hill in general went almost untroubled on its way trying to forget that it was still awaiting a fulfillment, and even Alix began to glean a little comfort from the thought that hope was but deferred. Her heart was sick, her faith weak, but hope still lived. She clung through the long days to Gerry, junior, and waited.

At Maple House the beating of young hearts amounted to a din, but it was suddenly stilled by a day of drenching rain. After the very tame excitement of seeing J. Y. and the judge off for the city, gloom settled in the faces of the children. Cousin Tom, in rubber boots and coat, came down the road from Elm House to find company for misery. The barn was requisitioned and became the scene of a subdued frolic, but it afforded meager diversion. The hay was not in yet, the empty lofts were dreary. In the afternoon Mrs. J. Y. was besieged to surrender the house and finally did. Alan had gone to his room and closed the door. The captain was plunged in invulnerable slumber.

Somebody rapped at Alan's door and he called, "Come in." The door opened and revealed Nance, junior. Behind her was a giggling, whispering throng. The spirit of fun danced in Nance's eyes. Her cheeks were flushed and her golden head was in disarray. "Oh, Cousin Alan," she cried, "grandma's given us leave for hide and seek and we're all going to play except mother and grandma and the captain. Please come, too, Cousin Alan."

From behind her came a modified echo, "Pleath do, Couthin Alan." Alan smiled and laid down his book. "All right," he laughed.

Maple House was a rambling abode that had grown and spread like the giant maples that sheltered it. In what age the captain had demanded a wing or some bygone Nance a nursery for her children was chronicled in the annals of the house itself, to be revealed only to the searching, architectural eye. The key to the rambling structure lay in the thick-walled dining room, the parlor, one bedroom and the kitchen.

From the nucleus of these four rooms Maple House had grown, imposed and superimposed, until it overflowed the arbitrary bourne of kitchens and front doors and like some mounded vine rippled off on all sides, in vast living room, sunny nurseries and a broken fringe of broad verandas.

Clem Stood Before Him Dazed.

There were nooks that were satisfied and held back from further encroachment and there were outstanding corners that jutted boldly out over the sloping lawns and threatened a further raid.

Inside, the paths of daily life ran clearly enough through the maze, but on their flanks hung many a somber den for ambush or retreat. Cavernous closets, shadowy corners, lumbered attics and half-forgotten interstices of discarded space opened dark gorges to the intrepid, and threatened the nervous and unwary with what they might bring forth. The gods of childhood's games themselves could not have builded a better scene for that most palpitating of sports, hide and seek on a rainy day.

Alan soon entered into the spirit of the game. He found himself recollecting things about Maple House that he had more than half forgotten; strange byways under the roof; a vacant chamber, turned into a trunk room because one by one it had been robbed of its windows; and lastly the little attic that had been, as it were, left behind a wall.

Through this dreamland of a hundred children flitted the brood of the day, marshaled rather breathlessly by Clem and Alan. Anxious whispers, the scurrying of lightly shod feet, then a sudden silence but for the flutelike counting of some juvenile It, were followed by sudden screams and a wild race for the goal. Maple House had never countenanced the effete and diluted sport of I Spy; it was all for hide and seek, where you had to hold your man when found or beat him to the goal.

Great was the excitement when the littlest It of all caught Cousin Alan by a tackle around the ankle that spoke a volume of promise for the littlest it's academic career and brought a glow of achievement to his perspiring face. Alan was placed at the newel at the foot of the great staircase and duly admonished in treble voices not to look. The treble voices rained excited instructions on him, carried away by youth's confidence in its ability to teach its grandmother how to suck eggs. Alan started to count slowly in sonorous tones. With a last shriek and the patter of many feet the trebles faded away into silence.

Alan crept stealthily up the stairs. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of the twitching jumpers of the littlest, who was too fat to quite fit the retreat he had chosen. But Alan did not quite see until it was too late. The littlest exploded the vast breath he had been holding in and plunged headlong down the stairs. As he rolled by the newel he stuck out a sturdy arm and held fast. He shouted a pean of victory and once more palpitating silence fell on the house.

Alan wondered if he could find the way to the little attic. He hurried along the twisted halls, up a tiny flight of steps, turned, dived through a low, narrow tunnel and threw open the long-forgotten door. It was as though he had suddenly opened a portal on his own childhood. A great, pensioned rocking chair held the middle of the floor as within his ken it always had held it. Ancient garments hung from pegs on the walls and from hooks on the rafters. A box or two and more disabled furniture littered the floor. The whole was faintly lit up by the light from a little dormer window. Nothing stirred. Alan drew a long breath. He was not disappointed. No one had thought to come here but himself.

Suddenly a bit of the pendent wardrobe was flung aside and an apparition dashed for the door. Alan sprang in front of it, threw his arms around it, held it tight. It struggled, laughed, ceased to struggle, and looked up as Alan looked down. Clem's face was very near to his. Her body, still throbbing with excitement, was in his arms. Alan felt such a rioting surge in his blood as he had never known before. He wanted to kiss Clem. He felt that he must kiss her, that there was not strength enough left in him to do anything else. Then his eyes met hers and he forgot himself and remembered Clem. His soul cried, "Sacrilege," and he dropped his arms from about her and stepped back.

Clem stood before him, dazed. She was in her stockinged feet. In each hand she held a little slipper. Her eyes were big and full of the soft reproach of the mortally wounded. Alan felt ashamed and looked away. He had to break the silence. "Well, you're caught," he said lamely.

Clem dropped one slipper, threw up her hand and brushed the disordered hair from her forehead. "Yes, I'm caught," she said, and her lip trembled on the words.

Chapter XXX

One day in midsummer Alan, to his disgust, was summoned peremptorily by McDale & McDale. Half an hour's consultation was all they required and Alan was pleased to find as he left their offices that he still had plenty of time to catch the early train back to Red Hill. There were only two afternoon trains for that difficult goal.

As he strolled up the avenue he was arrested by the sight of a tall figure standing on the curb watching the swirl of the traffic. The figure was dressed in a heavy whipcord suit and a Stetson hat, uncompromisingly domed in the very form in which it had been blocked by the makers. A street gamin yelled, "Hi! fellers, look what's got away from Buffalo Bill!" Kemp gazed sad-eyed but unmoved over his drooping mustaches, doubtless mourning the passing of the shooting iron and the consequent unanswerable affronts of a fostered civilization.

Alan elbowed his way across the stream of pedestrians and clutched him by the arm. Kemp whirled around as if to meet attack, but smiled when he saw Alan's face. "I was jest calculatin' on roundin' you up," he drawled.

"Where did you come from? Where are you off to?" cried Alan, and without waiting for an answer he hailed a cab, hustled Kemp into it and ordered it to his club. He forgot his early train.

In the club lobby Kemp surrendered his hat reluctantly to the ready attendant and followed Alan across soft carpets to a quiet corner where two enormous chairs seemed to be making confidences to each other. One could imagine them aggrieved at being interrupted and sat upon.

"Well, Kemp," said Alan, "I'm glad to see you. What's yours?"

"Rye 'nd a chaser," said Kemp.

"Same for me, waiter," ordered Alan. "Now, Kemp, tell me all about it."

"I just blowed in from Lieber's, Mr. Wayne, and I'm headed west."

"How's Lieber and where's Gerry? Did Lieber get my cable?"

Kemp looked sadly out through the window. "Lieber's dead."

"Dead? Lieber dead?"

Kemp nodded. "I found him with everything fixed for kickin' the bucket. He knew what was the matter, but he didn't tell me what it was. Said it had been comin' on him for some while an' thet the' wa'nt no he'p for it. But he got your cable, Mr. Wayne, and he wanted I should tell you that what you done wa'nt wasted. He said there wa'n't nothin' thet could he'p him through the way that cable did. He said it was the passpo't he'd been waitin' for an' thet you wa'n't to think it come too late, because he reckoned he was goin' to use it. Said it kinder cleared his trail for him. Them was all the things he said I should tell you."

Kemp stopped talking and downed his drink. Alan sat silent and thoughtful. Lieber was gone and made a gap in his life that he never knew had been filled. He wanted to know more. He turned to Kemp. "Well?"

"You remember the joa tree at Lieber's, Mr. Wayne? One o' the lonesomest trees on earth, I reckon, except when the Booganviller comes out an' then it's a happy mountain o' red and pu'ple that kind o' lights up the hull desert."

Alan nodded.

"Well, then, you remember the big bowlder of graywacke under the tree. That's Lieber's headstone. He had a mason up from the coast and he made us carry him out under the tree to watch the man work. He give him a model cut into a boa'd to copy f'm. I'm some reader, but them words beat me every time. I corralled 'em on a bit o' paper, though, an' here they be."

Kemp drew a slip of paper from the same old wallet that housed "The Purple City." He handed it to Alan. "Wish you'd put me on," he said. "All I know is it ain't American an' it ain't Mex."

The words on the slip looked as if they had been printed by a child with painstaking care. Alan stared as he saw them. "Qui de nous n'a pas eu sa terre promise, son jour d'extase, et sa fin en exil?" he read slowly to himself, and then, with his eyes far away, translated for Kemp, "'Who of us has not had his promised land, his day of ecstasy and his end in exile?'"

Kemp nodded and held out his hand for the slip of paper. He put it back in his wallet and said, "I suppose the feller thet wrote that was thinkin' mostly of a man's mind, but when it comes to facts them words don't fit Lieber. He got more exile than was comin' to him; it et up the ecstasy an' more of the promised land. But I don' know. They's lots of folks that needs to worry more'n Lieber over crossin' the divide."

They sat thoughtful for some time and then Alan remembered Red Hill. "Where are you staying, Kemp?"

"Astor house."

Alan looked at his watch. "Come on," he said. "We've got to hustle. We've just got time to rush down and get your bag."

"What for?" drawled Kemp.

"I was bound for our place out in the country when I found you. We've got just forty minutes to catch the train. You're coming with me."

A wary look came into Kemp's eyes. "Your folks out there, Mr. Wayne?" he asked.

"Yes," said Alan, and then added, "Kemp, do you take me for a man that would steer you up against a game you don't hold cards in?"

"No," said Kemp, "I don't," and then found himself hatted and hurried into a taxi before he could further protest.

If Alan had any qualms about introducing Kemp to Red Hill they were soon allayed. Kemp was duly presented on the lawn at Maple House. To everything in petticoats he took off his hat and said "ma'am," but before the men he stood hatted and vouchsafed a short "Howdy!" accompanied by a handshake where it was invited.

Strange to Kemp must have seemed the group of which he found himself the center. At a tea table under the biggest maple sat Mrs. J. Y. She called Kemp and motioned to a chair beside her. Kemp let his lanky frame down slowly on the fragile structure, took off his domed hat and laid it on the grass at his side. For an instant Mrs. J. Y. fixed her soft, myopic gaze on him and then looked away. Clem brought him a cup of tea and a biscuit. Kemp held the cup and saucer in the hollow of his hand and looked dubiously at their contents. "Would you like something else, Mr. Kemp?" asked Mrs. J. Y. softly, "some other drink, I mean?"

Kemp's quick eye roved over the group. He saw that nobody was taking anything but tea and at the same time he noted gratefully that nobody was watching him. The judge and J. Y. were talking to each other. Nance, junior, and Cousin Tom were kneeling before Gerry, junior, stolen for a short hour from Alix. That dwarf Moloch, arrayed in starchy white that stuck out like a ballet skirt above his sturdy, fat legs, was gravely devouring a sacrifice of cake. Charlie Sterling lay full length on the ground while his brood, with shrill cries at his frequent eruptions, buried and reburied him with sofa pillows. Nance, Alan and Clem sipped tea and cheered on the children's efforts.

Kemp turned a twinkling eye on Mrs. J. Y. "I ain't sayin', ma'am, thet this mixture is my usual bev'rage, but a man don't expect to have his usual handed down f'm a pulpit, and likewise I see no call for folks turnin' their front lawns into a bar."

Kemp could feel a scene; his strange nature was moved at finding itself rubbing elbows with such a group and when Kemp was moved he always talked to hide his emotion. Mrs. J. Y.'s kindly eyes led him on, made him feel weirdly akin to those quiet, contented men and women and clean-frocked, rosy-cheeked children frolicking against the peaceful setting of shady trees, old lawns and the rambling house that staidly watched them like some motherly hen, wings outspread, ever ready to brood and shelter.

Kemp's eyes left Mrs. J. Y.'s face and swept over the scene again. "Speakin' of bars," he went on in his soft drawl, "I don't think a missus ever has no call to handle drinks over an' above what goes in 'nd out of a milk pail, which isn't drink in a manner o' speakin'. I can't rightly rec'llect that I ever seen a missus leanin' over either side of a bar in this country, but I've strayed some from the home fence an' you may be su'prised, Mis' Wayne, to know thet they's lands where no one ain't never heerd tell on a barman an' where barmaids is some commoner'n the milkin' brand."

"Yes?" said Mrs. J. Y. encouragingly.

"Sho' thing," replied Kemp; "I seen 'em. I won't forget the fust time because I was consid'able embarrassed. I missed a steamer in Noo Yawk an' the firm was in a hurry, so they sent me acrost to S'uthampton, an' while I was waitin' for the Brazil boat a feller I'd picked up on boa'd showed me around some. Well, it wa'n't long before he corralled me, quite willin', in a bar. I pulled off my hat and he says, 'Why d'you take off yo' hat?' and I says, 'Why don't you take off yourn? Don't you see they's a lady hea'?' Then he bust out laughin' and everybody that was nea' enough to hea' bust out laughin' an' the missus behind the bar laughed, too, though somehow it didn't sound as if she laughed because she couldn't he'p it."

Kemp paused to blush over the memory. He did not notice that the judge and J. Y. had drawn quietly nearer and that the rest of the group of grown-ups were intent on his words. "They's times," he continued, "when it's fittin' that a man should be without shootin' irons an' that was one of 'em. I can't rightly say what would have happened but guessin's easy. When he was through laughin' the feller that was showin' me around slapped me on the back and sez, 'That ain't no lady; it's a barmaid.' An' then they all laughed some mo' and the missus just kind o' laughed an' I mought 'a' been dreamin', but I thought I seen a look in her eyes thet says she wasn't laughin' inside at all. Ever sence then I've been of opinion that a missus has no call to handle drinks an' I ce'tainly hope I'll never see one a'doin' of it under the home fence."

Kemp stayed at Maple House for a week. Before he left he was known throughout the countryside. His lanky figure, drooping mustaches, domed hat and the way he held out the reins in front of him when he rode marked him from the start, and when the youth of the surrounding farms learned that he was a genuine cowboy that had ridden everything with four legs, they worshiped from afar and gloried in casual approaches.

Just before he went away Kemp took it upon himself to call on Alix. Alan led him to where she sat on the lawn among the trees at The Firs and left him. Alix looked up in wonder at his tall, lank form. Kemp held his hat in his hand and twisted it nervously.

"Mis' Lansing," he said, "I want you should let me say a few words to ye. I seen Mister Lansing 'bout five weeks ago."

Alix sprang to her feet, her pale cheeks aflame. "Yes?" she said. "When—when is he coming?" She sank down again and buried her face in her hands. The shame of putting that question to a stranger overwhelmed her.

Kemp sat down near her. "Sho, Mis' Lansing," he said, "don' you take it hard that you're gettin' word of Mr. Lansing through me. Him an' me an' Lieber's ben 'most pardners."

Tenderness had crept into Kemp's drawl. Alix looked up. "Please," she said, "tell me all about him—all about these years."

Kemp hesitated before he spoke. "I ain't got the words ner the right to tell you all about them three years, Mis' Lansing, an' I can't tell you all about Mr. Lansing, 'cause the biggest part o' some men don't meet the eye—it's inside on 'em. Thet's the way it is with Mr. Lansing. I c'n tell you, though, thet Mr. Lansing is well an' strong—strong enough to swing a steer by the tail.

"That's what I know. Now I'll tell ye some o' my thoughts. Mr. Lansing wa'n't born to be a maverick. Right now, I'm willin' to wager, he's headed for home and the corral, but he ain't comin' on the run—he's browsin' and chewin' his cud.

"When I seen him five weeks ago I thought on hog-tyin' him an' bringin' him along, 'cause Mr. Wayne had tol' me about you an' the two-year-old. But it come to me that a woman of sperit—one of ourn—wouldn't want her man should be brought in. She'd sooner he'd hog-tie hisself."

Alix' head hung in thought. Her hands were clasped in her lap. As Kemp's last words sank in the first smile of many days came to her lips.

Kemp rose and said good-by. With his hat pulled well over his brows and his hands in his pockets, he slouched toward the gate.

Alix jumped up and followed him. She laid her thin, light hand on his arm. "Thank you," she said, a little breathlessly. Kemp's deep-set eyes twinkled down on her. He held out his big, rough hand and Alix gripped it.

"Not good-by," she said.

Kemp is a simple soul, for all his travels. Will Alix be able to worm out of him the facts about Gerry's affair with little Margarita and "the boy" in South America?

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

High Explosive Necessary.

Edith—If you didn't want Mr. Boreleigh to stay so late why didn't you drop a hint?

Ethel—Dropping a hint wouldn't move him—unless it was made of dynamite.

No man lives unto himself, but most men make a mighty effort in that direction.

The things that don't concern them are the very things that give some people the most concern.